

Nihilism as Axiological Illness

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Abstract. The presentation of nihilism as a phenomenon integrated in the category of illnesses is very common in the scientific literature. This paper is centered on the fact that nihilism is a major disease of the axiological conscience, an illness that can be diagnosed and treated by the philosopher like a ‘physician of culture’.

Keywords: nihilism, axiological illness, physician of culture, reevaluation of values, decadence.

I. THE SAVIOR AS *IDIOT*

Nihilism as a cultural phenomenon is associated with a form of madness or with other illnesses of the human spirit, or is considered an illness itself. The nihilist is not in his right mind or suffers from a strange illness that cannot be diagnosed or treated by any physician. These activities are the responsibility of another type of physician, a ‘physician of culture’ as Friedrich Nietzsche said.

The nihilist, who knows by certitude that there is nothing behind any recognized and traditional values, has been seen in history as a lunatic, barbarian, out of his mind, or idiotic. In the following lines I will refer to this final state, using as a starting point Nietzsche’s strange opinion about the psychological type of Jesus. Nietzsche polemized with Renan, who ‘has introduced the two most inappropriate concepts possible into his explanation of the Jesus type: the concept of *genius* and the concept of the *hero* (*héros*)’.¹ Nietzsche’s criticism has very strong fundamentals. Jesus’ psychological features are opposed to those of the hero.

And even more, what a misunderstanding is the word ‘genius’! Our whole concept, our cultural concept, of ‘spirit’ has no meaning

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, 1988. *The Anti-Christ* in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books), p. 600.

whatever in the world in which Jesus lived. Spoken with the precision of a physiologist, even an entirely different word would still be more nearly fitting here than the word *idiot*.²

Only a misunderstanding caused the word 'idiot' to be excluded by some editors and this action was governed by the idea that using this word would commit blasphemy, or that it was just a bad formulation of a poor lunatic as was Nietzsche's case in his last years. Nietzsche referred to Jesus as a psychological type of idiot not only in his *The Anti-Christ*, but also in other writings. When Nietzsche said that Jesus is an idiot he referred to the fact that Jesus is more than hero and genius together. In this context 'idiot' has no pejorative signification. It is obvious that Nietzsche, the philologist, did not use this word randomly to designate the psychological type of Jesus. There are two motivations for this option: first it is well known that even the people close to Jesus, as we can read in *The New Testament*, considered Jesus as a 'mad' man (Mark, 3: 21)³; and, second, when Nietzsche named Jesus, as spiritual type, an *idiot*, he was referring, as it is known in scientific literature, to Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*. The Prince, Myshkin, childishly believed in the victory of good in the world, in beauty as a force that will change the world, and in what is generally named *value*.

Speaking from an axiological point of view, Jesus, Don Quixote, prince Myshkin or any other authentic idealist is not ill; on the contrary, they symbolize the health of spirit, the normality of axiological consciousness, the capacity to perceive the highest values. Truly ill are those people who laugh at these 'idiots'. Indeed, Nietzsche said that 'there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross'⁴. The world of *The Gospels* is a sick world, 'as in a Russian novel, a world in which the scum of society, nervous disorders, and "childlike" idiocy seem to be having a rendezvous'⁵. Especially preoccupied by the psychological type of Messiah as it really was, not how he was transformed by the human, too human motivations of the first Christians, Nietzsche noted:

It is regrettable that a Dostoevsky did not live near this most interesting of all decadents – I mean someone who would have

² Ibidem, p. 601.

³ Holy Bible - Douay-Rheims, 2005. Translated by Richard Challoner. Publisher: Baronius Press.

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 612.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 603.

known how to sense the very stirring charm of such a mixture of the sublime, the sickly and the childlike.⁶

Referring to Jesus as an idiot, Nietzsche had in mind the fascination of the reader for Prince Myshkin, *the idiot* created by Dostoevsky, fascination which results from the bizarre mix of sublime, illness and childlike. Even those who read Dostoevsky's writings for the first time can easily see that Prince Myshkin is always considered as behaving like a child and that is the main reproach addressed to him. As an example:

There was a special feature in the prince, consisting of the extraordinary naivety of the attention with which he always listened to something that interested him, and of the replies he gave when he was addressed with questions about it. His face and even the attitude of his body somehow reflected this naivety, this faith, suspecting neither mockery nor humor.⁷

This paper centers on these types of men who in their innocent belief in values behave like children. Dostoevsky's idiot, like Jesus, understood very well what happened when laughter arose wherever he went. "There are certain ideas, there are lofty ideas, which I ought not to start talking about, because I'll certainly make everyone laugh".⁸ It is obvious that Nietzsche was thinking of Dostoevsky's character when he said that Jesus was neither hero nor genius, but an idiot.

All of this discussion about the bizarre mix of sublimity, illness and childishness, which transform *the idiot* into *the savior* of humanity, is haunted by another extraordinary character of European culture: Don Quixote de La Mancha. The influence of Cervantes' novel on German literature and philosophy is well known. The Romantics were seduced by the character of Don Quixote.

Friedrich and August Schlegel, L. Tieck, Schelling and Jean Paul have named Cervantes a precursor (Vorreiter) of The Romantic

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Fiodor M. Dostoievski, 2009. *Idiotul* (București: Editura Adevărul Holding), vol. II, p. 21. For the english translation of the text it was used Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, 2003. *The idiot* (Vintage), translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 28.

movement. Cervantes was celebrated as prototype of the Romantic author... All Romantics, from Brentano, Armin, Novalis, Eichendorff, Kleist, Chamisso, Hofmann to Heine wrote having in mind this source.⁹

Even philosophers such as Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hegel and Schopenhauer were preoccupied by the fantastic world of Don Quixote¹⁰, and the Romantics considered Cervantes' novel a philosophical text.¹¹

The philosophical content, more exactly the axiological one, of the novel *Don Quixote*¹², was underlined by Turghenev in a lecture called *Hamlet and Don Quixote*, in January 10, 1860. As a result of the publication of his novel *Fathers and Sons*, Turghenev was considered for a long time the man who brought the concept of *nihilism* into the minds of his contemporaries. For him Don Quixote was 'before everything else the belief, the belief in something eternal... in truth, which is situated out of man'.¹³ When he worked at his well known novel *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky also said that 'there is no book deeper ... than *Don Quixote*. This book is till this day the last and the greatest word of the human spirit'.¹⁴ So, the idea that when Nietzsche said Jesus is an idiot he did not refer just to Dostoevsky's *idiot* but also to Cervantes' character is no speculation. In the imagination of the Russian author, Prince Myshkin is a mix between Jesus and Don Quixote, and this aspect is amplified in the manner in which Nietzsche understands *The Idiot*. More than anyone else, Nietzsche had the power and the art to read this novel and not by chance he said that Dostoevsky is 'the only psychologist, incidentally, from whom I had something to learn; he ranks among the most beautiful strokes of fortune in my life, even more than my discovery of Stendhal'.¹⁵

⁹ Anton Dieterich, 1984. *Miguel de Cervantes. Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag), p. 126.

¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹ Sebastien Neumeister, 2005. *Der romantische Don Quijote*, in : *Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quijote. Explizite und implizite Diskurse im "Don Quijote"*, hrsg. von Christoph Strosetzki (Berlin: Schmidt Verlag), p. 310.

¹² Nicolae Râmbu, 2008. 'Axiological Reflections about Don Quijote' in *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, no. 10, pp. 65 – 79.

¹³ Turghenev, *Hamlet und Don Quijote*, apud Anton Dietrich, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹⁴ Dieterich, *Miguel de Cervantes*, p. 127.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, 1988. *Twilight of the Idols* in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books), p. 549.

Let us return to the *idiot's* naivety, to which Nietzsche refers in his speech about the psychological type of Jesus and let us think just for a few seconds with *Redlichkeit*, as Nietzsche said, with honesty. Imagine that in our world comes a Christian, a man animated by Jesus' values. We must confess that this will be a bizarre appearance, which, if he could survive enough time, would bring laughter wherever he may go. On the world scene this character would not be more different than Don Quixote or Prince Myshkin. So, let us imagine that this man would not just say, but he would truly believe and live according to the following expressions: 'Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you' (Matthew, 5:44) or 'But I say to you not to resist evil: but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other' (Matthew, 5:39). Leaving beside the fact that this man would not survive a single day, he will be immediately pointed out and considered an idiot, or 'poor in spirit'. When he traced the lines of Jesus' character, Nietzsche thought about this type of man.

'Where my honesty (*meine Redlichkeit*) ceases, I am blind and I also want to be blind.'¹⁶ To translate what Nietzsche named *Redlichkeit* as honesty or sincerity is too little. Dostoevsky's hero, Prince Myshkin, is profoundly *redlich*.

I decided to do my duty honestly and firmly. Maybe it will be boring and painful for me to be with people. In the first place I decided to be polite and candid with everybody; no one can ask more of me. Maybe I'll be considered a child here, too—so be it! Everybody also considers me an idiot for some reason, and in fact I was once so ill that I was like an idiot; but what sort of idiot am I now, when I myself understand that I'm considered an idiot?¹⁷

From an axiological perspective he is not an idiot, but the only lucid man, the last human being in a world of non-humans. All the others are possessed by duplicity-hypocrites, mean, insincere, plotters, profiteers without scruples, especially after they heard he was the heir of an important wealth. Myshkin, as any idealist, was a child that believed in stories that always end with the victory of good. All those who stopped laughing and tried to understand the poor 'idiot' remarked his *naivety* and

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, 1988. *Thus spoke Zarathustra* in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books), p. 363.

¹⁷ Dostoevski, *Idiotul*, p. 137.

his *sincerity*.¹⁸ He is such an 'idiot', so 'poor in spirit' that he believes that people will appreciate him for his beliefs in values, but, as in the case of Don Quixote, only because he was doing good from the goodness of his heart, everybody thought that he was insane. Instead of being illuminated by the values that he brought, Nastásya Filippovna said to him: 'Well, that's...out of some novel! That, my darling prince, is old gibberish, the world's grown smarter now, and that's all nonsense!'¹⁹ She accepted this sort of 'gibberish' when she found out that the Prince had become the heir of a fabulous inheritance:

I'm a princess myself now, you heard it – the prince won't let anyone offend me! Afanasy Ivanovich, congratulate me; now I'll be able to sit next to your wife anywhere; it's useful to have such a husband, don't you think? A million and a half, and a prince, and, they say, an idiot to boot, what could be better? Only now does real life begin!²⁰

To sincerely wish with *Redlichkeit* the happiness of a person, without any interest, without wanting anything from this world and from the next life is a desire of an 'idiot' man. When Nietzsche named Jesus an 'idiot' he surely had in mind the character created by Dostoevsky and the latter was haunted by Don Quixote when wrote his book. Myshkin sent a note to Agláya Ivánovna. She was

dropping the letter into her desk drawer. The next day she took it out again and put it into a thick, sturdily bound book (as she always did with her papers, so as to find them quickly when she needed them). And only a week later did she happen to notice what book it was. It was *Don Quixote de La Mancha*. Aglaya laughed terribly—no one knew why.²¹

Like Don Quixote, Myshkin is a man full of virtues who sees the world through his naivety and his generosity and this is why Elizavéta (Lizavéta) Prokófeyevna said to him: 'Everyone considers you a fool and deceives you!'

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, vol. I., p. 212.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 218.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 243.

Some academic papers take up the relation between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky for those who want to find more about it. I want to emphasize the idea that from an axiological point of view health and illness have different significations from those traditionally associated with them, and the idiot, as a psychological type of Jesus, is a significant example.

II. BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE POOR IN SPIRIT? AN AXIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF A MYSTERIOUS EXPRESION

Using as an assumption Nietzsche's idea of idiot, the psychological type of Jesus and Don Quixote, I present a new interpretation of the following expression as it appears in *The Bible*: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. (Matthew, 5:3). Every one of us has difficulties understanding the meaning of this enunciation. In fact, to be *redlich*, honest, we must recognize that this enunciation has no meaning, not just from the side of the Christian values but also from that of any values. An axiological conscience can not accept 'the poor in spirit' as a positive value.

From a novel axiological point of view, the expression 'the poor in spirit' and the whole enunciation about their happiness, which does not accord with the values imposed by Jesus, receives a new and different meaning. Redemption will be offered only to those 'poor in spirit', to idiots, as Nietzsche defined them. Only those who live according to the values brought by Jesus, those who are considered idiots by the rest of the world, will be redeemed. 'When Nietzsche characterized Jesus as an idiot, he did not do that with an insulting intention. By idiot Nietzsche understood – following the essential signification of the Greek term – an apolitical man who stands far away from public business.²² Nietzsche, in the context of considering Jesus an idiot, had in mind more than a person who is not interested in politics matters and who is not involved in the public life. In Nietzsche's view, Jesus symbolizes moral purity, so he cannot represent for others anything other than an idiot. The man who stands opposite to Jesus is Paul, the true founder of Christianity, who was fiercely criticized by Nietzsche. He is absolutely not an idiot, as Nietzsche

²² Hans-Jürgen Gawoll, 1989. *Nihilismus und Metaphysik. Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung vom deutschen Idealismus bis zu Heidegger* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog Verlag), p. 182.

mentioned in a note from 1888.²³ The whole array of features that characterizes Jesus, his childish and sublime charm, is missing in Saint Paul's personality.

On the heels of the 'glad tidings' came the very worst: those of Paul. In Paul was embodied the opposite type to that of the 'bringer of glad tidings': the genius in hatred, in the vision of hatred, in the inexorable logic of hatred. *How much* this dysangelist sacrificed to hatred!²⁴

In Nietzsche's view, Paul is the main person responsible for the corruption of Christianity, for its orientation in an opposite direction to that indicated by Jesus.

As we know from the Gospel of Mark, even Jesus' family and friends considered him mad, 'He is become mad' (Mark, 3:21). We must not look for occult significations. Every one who behaves today according to the original Christian values will be considered as 'becoming mad', as 'idiot'. We must differentiate two types of attitudes about Christianity in Nietzsche: a profound admiration for the values brought by Jesus and a tough criticism of perverted Christianity, especially regarding Saint Paul's writings. Modern values, based on corrupted Christianity, and having pity as their center, are '*nihilistic values*'.²⁵ Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche said that 'pity negates life and renders it more *deserving of negation*. Pity is the *practice* of nihilism'.²⁶ Through pity evil appears in the world, values lose their power because the law of natural selection is not respected and what must disappear continues to live and what must live disappears.

In our whole unhealthy modernity there is nothing unhealthier than Christian pity. To be physicians *here*, to be inexorable *here*, to wield the scalpel *here* – that is *our* part, that is *our* love of man, that is how *we* are philosophers, we *Hyperboreans*.²⁷

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 617.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 572.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 573.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 574.

A world in which pity stays is, in its axiological center, evolving towards nihilism.

Christianity, in the way it imposed itself in history, brought a sudden overthrow of Jesus' values and this happened through shrewdness²⁸, through abusive interpretation of Jesus' words. For Nietzsche, the expressions used in the *Gospels* are the symptoms of a very bad corruption that appeared in the first Christian community and then spread to all of Christianity.

One cannot read these Gospels cautiously enough; every word poses difficulties. I confess – one will pardon me – that precisely on this account they are a first-rate delight for a psychologist – as the opposite of all naïve corruption, as subtlety par excellence, as artistry in psychological corruption. The Gospels stand apart.²⁹

How must we read the enunciation 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' in order to understand it well? For Nietzsche, the philologist, 'the kingdom of heaven'

is a state of the heart – not something that is to come 'above the earth or 'after death'...The 'kingdom of God' is nothing that one expects; it has no yesterday – and no day after tomorrow, it will not come in 'a thousand years' – it is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere.³⁰

The corruption of Christianity is translated also into the interpretation of the concept of life after death as we can see in all interpreters and commentators from all kinds of Christian denominations. Both 'the kingdom of heaven' and 'the happiness' were understood differently from what Jesus wanted to transmit. Nietzsche repeats in his writings the idea that what Jesus had affirmed, his Christian successors had negated and what he had negated these had affirmed.³¹ The values he had negated are very well known: those of war, including self-defense, judging others, differences between nations and social classes, the anger, hatred, and

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 582.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 620.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 608.

³¹ Hermann L. Goldschmidt, 1941. *Der Nihilismus im Licht einer kritischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt), p. 25.

disdain; but the Christians became themselves soldiers, judges, merchants, theologians, priests, philosophers, kings or emperors.³² The church became the opposite of what Jesus preached. The Christians, as Nietzsche said, repeated Jesus' words 'Judge not, that you may not be judged' (Matthew, 7:1) but they still 'consign to hell everything that stands in their way'.³³ Such overthrow of values through an abusive interpretation is a premise of nihilism, of the belief that behind each value stands nothing.

Saint Paul, as Nietzsche believed, instead of being an apostle of love, was one of hatred and revenge.

Indeed, one cannot be a philologist or physician without at the same time being an *anti-Christian*. For as a philologist one sees behind the 'holy books', as a physician, behind the physiological depravity of the typical Christian. The physician says 'incurable'; the philologist 'swindle'.³⁴

Let us return now to the puzzling enunciation 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', puzzling because the values that it affirms are not those preached by Jesus. Nietzsche mentioned that happiness is not related to some conditions, less to the condition of being 'poor in spirit'; on the contrary, happiness is the only reality, in other words a state, a *practice*. Happy is that one who

is distinguished by acting differently: by not resisting, either in words or in his heart, those who treat him ill; by making no distinction between foreigner and native, between Jew and not-Jew ('the neighbor' – really the coreligionist, the Jew); by not growing angry with anybody, by not despising anybody; by not permitting himself to be seen or involved at courts of law ('hot swearing'); by not divorcing his wife under any circumstances, not even if his wife has been proved unfaithful. All of this, at bottom one principle; all of this, consequences of one instinct. The life of the Redeemer was nothing other than *this* practice – nor was his death anything else.³⁵

³² Ibidem, p. 26.

³³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 621.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 628.

³⁵ Ibidem, pp. 606-7.

Having in mind the signification of this *practive*, the meaning of the puzzling enunciation could be 'Blessed are the idiots', following Nietzsche's interpretation, 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. There are many passages in *The Bible* where 'the authentic Christian practice' is considered to be something only an idiot could do. I offer here just one example: 'But the sensual man perceived not these things that are of the Spirit of God; for it is foolishness to him' (1st. Corinthians, 2:14). In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche made the idiot's portrait and this portrait suits Jesus, Prince Myshkin and all idealists whenever they lived and who, as Plato said, are 'going to act prudently in private or in public'³⁶, being more attracted by the noumena, their souls looking at those things above.

III. PHILOSOPHY AS CONVALESCENCE TREATISE

If Nietzsche saw everywhere 'sick spirits', 'epileptics of the concept', 'sick reason' and saw the Church as 'the catholic madhouse', could not we assume that he was mad not only when he was hospitalized in Jena but even in his entire life? Could not the fact that he easily considered Saint Paul's words as 'the talk of a lunatic' be a sign of his own madness? Are not 'The mental illnesses' of the Christian church and 'the madhouse world of the whole millennia' of Christianity, mentioned in *The Anti-Christ*, signs of the place where Nietzsche himself finally arrived?

In the following lines I elucidate the problem of Nietzsche's illnesses. On one side there are authors like Gottfried Benn, saying that the subject of 'Nietzsche and his illness' has no signification for Nietzsche's philosophical work and if would have died in 1980, his work would remain the same today.³⁷ On the other side some authors mention the fact that Nietzsche's madness is not a late appearance in his life and the reality is that he was never mentally healthy. In his *Entartung*, Max Nordau has a whole chapter about Nietzsche, considering that Nietzsche's philosophy is a degenerate one, an expression of a mentally sick man. When you read Nietzsche's writings, said Nordau, you have the impression that those pages were written by an angry madman. His whole work is the expression of a delirium. He wanted at any price to impose his fixations; that is why he proclaimed, like a tyrant, instead of demonstrating or arguing an idea. It is not a surprise that he constantly contradicts himself on the same page.

³⁶ Plato, 1991. *The Republic* (Basic Books), translated by Allan Bloom, 517 c.

³⁷ Gottfried Benn, 1962. *Nietzsche – Nach fünfzig Jahren* in *Essays, Reden, Vorträge* (Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag), p. 487.

When he realized this, as Nordau observed, Nietzsche said that he wanted to amuse himself, deceiving the readers:

It is hard to be understood ... and you should give heartfelt thanks for the goodwill apparent in any subtlety of interpretation. But as far as 'good friends' are concerned, they are always too easy-going and think that they have a right to be easy-going, just because they are friends. So it is best to grant them some leeway from the very start, and leave some latitude for misunderstandings: – and then you can even laugh. Or, alternatively, get rid of them altogether, these good friends, – and then laugh some more!³⁸

On the other hand, as Nordau noted, in Nietzsche's writings there are whole pages which say nothing, being simple affirmations of a madman. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the main paper used by Nordau in order to demonstrate the fact that Friedrich Nietzsche was mentally ill his entire life.

When an idea is clearly presented it is just a platitude formulated in such a manner as to amaze. Nordau offers as example the *Umwertung aller Werte* that was already a commonplace in the history of culture when Nietzsche presented it as a great discovery. Everybody knew that values are periodically reevaluated in history. Nietzsche was original just when he was in trance, when his speech, very good from the stylistic point of view, did not say anything. All the rest, says Nordau, is obvious triviality. The philosophy of will is too much inspired by Schopenhauer, 'my great master', as Nietzsche named him, 'to whom that book of mine spoke as though he were still present'.³⁹ Nietzsche's originality, in Nordau's view, consists in the childish reversal of a rational discourse and his philosophy was born from the obsession to contradict, deny and polemicize against everybody and on every subject. All these are symptoms of Nietzsche's mental illness. In the preface of *The Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche said that he was inspired by Paul Rée's *The Origin of Moral Sensations*. Even Paul Rée's ideas seemed to be strange; Nietzsche wrote:

I was given the initial stimulation to publish something about my hypotheses on the origin of morality by a clear, honest and clever, even too-clever little book, in which I first directly encountered the

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, 2002. *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 28-9.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, 2007. *On the Genealogy of Morality* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 6-7.

back-to front and perverse kind of genealogical hypotheses, actually the *English* kind, which drew me to it – with that power of attraction which everything contradictory and antithetical has ... I have, perhaps, never read anything to which I said ‘no’, sentence by sentence and deduction by deduction, as I did to this book: but completely without annoyance and impatience.⁴⁰

Max Nordau mentions that we must not doubt this affirmation because it is according to his philosophical style. It is a typical reaction of a sick mind, affected by the obsession to contradict and negate. In *Gay Science*, where we find the most elaborated presentation of the relation between illness and philosophy, Nietzsche recognizes his own desire to deny: ‘my way of thinking requires a warlike soul, a desire to hurt, a delight in saying no’.⁴¹ His obsession to deny is also clearly expressed in *Twilight of the Idols*: ‘My taste, which may be the opposite of a tolerant taste, is in this case too far from saying Yes indiscriminately: it does not like to say Yes; rather even No; but best of all, nothing’.⁴²

Having as starting point these types of citations, Nordau concludes that Nietzsche had a born perverse predisposition to transform healthy moral inclination into its contrary. He was a madman, but a peaceful one, who never turned to action. His destructive actions were shown only in writing. But in Nietzsche’s speech there is something that gives shivers: his cruel philosophical representations are always accompanied by a feeling of pleasure. The specialists, as Nordau reminds us, have a precise word for this type of illness: sadism.⁴³ In Nietzsche’s case the sadism is limited only to the spiritual sphere and its perverse satisfaction is manifested in the ideal field.⁴⁴ To sustain this type of hypothesis, Nordau offers in his *Entartung* many excerpts from which cruel images are accompanied by representations of voluptuousness. To exemplify: ‘At the centre of all these noble races we cannot fail to see the beast of prey, the magnificent *blond beast* avidly prowling round for spoil and victory’⁴⁵ The noble races were also beasts of prey, characterized by ‘their unconcern and scorn for safety,

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, 2008. *The Gay Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 53.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books), p. 556.

⁴³ Max Nordau, 1984. *Dégénérescence*, vol. II (Paris: Alcan), p. 366.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 367.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*, p. 23.

body, life, comfort, their shocking cheerfulness and depth of delight in all destruction'.⁴⁶ The aversion against man, mentioned repeatedly by Nietzsche, is based on the fact that man is 'out of the beast of prey'.⁴⁷ In *The Gay Science* there are some references to 'the voluptuousness of his own hell', the voluptuousness of pain, 'Who will attain something great if he does not feel in himself the power to inflict great pain?'⁴⁸, about the joy of the dangerous life and the saintly cruelty.

Between 1892 and 1893, when the two volumes of Nordau's *Entartung*, appeared, Friedrich Nietzsche was hospitalized as incurably mad in the hospital headed by Professor Binswagner in Jena.

Why does Max Nordau insist so much on Nietzsche's madness, especially on the fact that he had been born with this illness? The reason is that 'Nietzsche had become the author of a spiritual contamination and to stop this means to reveal his madness'.⁴⁹ As an epidemic disease, Nietzsche's philosophy had spread very rapidly. The success of his books was seen as a sign of a degenerated world, an ill one. His readers were considered like their preferred author, degenerates and sadists, even if this type of sadism does not surpass the ideal level. From Nordau's point of view, Nietzsche's disciples were alienated.

Madness and *alienation* are too general to define precisely as mental illness. Nietzsche was affected especially by 'maniac exaltation'⁵⁰, which was one way he often lost the logical weir of his ideas, not knowing what his starting point was anymore, and finishing the phrase with a false conclusion, which had no connection with the hypothesis he used. Among the examples used by Nordau in the medical interpretation of the philosopher's illness symptoms is the following one:

Hah! Come up, dignity! / Virtuous dignity! European dignity! /
Blow, blow again, / Bellows of virtue! / Hah! / Once more roar, /
Roar morally! / As a moral lion / Roar before the daughters of the
wilderness! / For virtuous howling, / My most charming girls, / Is
more than anything else / European fervor, European ravenous
hunger. / And there I stand even now / As a European; / I cannot

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181.

⁴⁹ Nordau, *Dégénérescence*, p. 372.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 378.

do else; God help me! / Amen. / *Wilderness grows: woe unto him that harbors wildernesses!*⁵¹

Nietzsche's psychic diseases were analyzed in great detail. Here I am interested only in two aspects: first is the quick and alarming propagation of Nietzsche's work through a sort of contamination and second the value of the disease, the extraordinary importance that Nietzsche offered to the disease in the process of creation. It is very true that Nietzsche suffered from many somatic and psychic diseases but the voluptuousness of sufferance, underlined by Max Nordau, was wrongly interpreted. What was left out is the research on Nietzsche's spiritual illnesses. As he recognized himself, it is hard to differentiate between soul (or psyche) and spirit, especially when we talk about illness.

One might guess that I do not want to take my leave ungratefully from that time of severe illness whose profits I have not yet exhausted even today: I am well aware of the advantages that my erratic health gives me over all burly minds. A philosopher who has passed through many kinds of health, and keeps passing through them again and again, has passed through an equal number of philosophies; he simply *cannot* but translate his state every time into the most spiritual form and distance – this art of transfiguration just *is* philosophy. We philosophers are not free to separate soul from body as the common people do; we are even less free to separate soul from spirit.⁵²

Besides somatic and psychic diseases, Nietzsche suffered together with his epoch from a spiritual illness: nihilism. This is a strange illness and on this particular one I want to keep an eye. Some confusions and false interpretations about the praise of disease and the voluptuousness of torture have been born from the interest given only to the somatic and psychic diseases and from the assumption that nihilism is a philosophical doctrine or a *Weltanschauung*. 'Nihilism is not obtained as it is *Weltanschauung*, but you are contaminated by it like a disease.'⁵³ This

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, p. 421.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 6.

⁵³ Hans Lilje, 1947. *Nihilismus* (Tübingen: Furcht-Verlag), p. 24, apud Gerhard Gloege, 'Nihilismus?' in Dieter Arendt (Hrsg.), *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte in der*

affirmation is correct but I must add: it is not a psychical disease as it was characterized by all those who had interpreted nihilism as a disease phenomenon, but an illness of the soul.

The voluptuousness that Nietzsche feels in the face of the overthrow of all values, his great satisfaction in saying *no*, as he confessed in *The Gay Science*, the praise of pain, his cruelty as the great festive joy etc. are easily remarked by any of his readers. If we have in mind the psychosomatic signification of illness, then Nordau's conclusions are impossible to avoid. But for Nietzsche:

Only great pain, that long, slow pain that takes its time and in which we are burned, as it were, over green wood, forces us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and put aside all trust, everything good-natured, veiling, mild, average – things in which formerly we may have found our humanity.⁵⁴

The nihilism, the illness that makes us *deeper*⁵⁵, is not a psychical illness but a spiritual one and from this point of view, Nietzsche is not a patient but a physician of culture. He did not only diagnose the main illness of the European spirit but also, as a good European, was preoccupied by the defeat of nihilism, its surpassing, and by the capacity to get to 'the great wealth' passing inevitably through 'the great pain'. He becomes what a true philosopher must be: a physician of culture.

In the world of spirit the illness is not necessarily something bad; on the contrary, we must raise our ideas from our pain.⁵⁶ Regarding the main cultural illness of Europe, Nietzsche considered that all its creative impulses are born through his sufferance:

Europe is a patient who owes the utmost gratitude to his incurability and to the perpetual changes in his affliction: these incessantly new conditions, these no less incessantly new dangers, pains, and modes of information have finally generated an

wissenschaftlichen Diskussion unseres Jahrhunderts (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), p. 53.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

intellectual irritability that approximates genius and that is in any case the mother of all genius.⁵⁷

The illness is not in Nietzsche's work only a main philosophical category, but it is also an essential part in the process of the reevaluation of all values. To the question: 'Why I am so wise?', 'Why I am so clever?' and 'Why do I write such good books?', which are the names of the first three chapters of his *Ecce Homo*, the answer is the same: because I was so ill that 'a long, all-too-long succession of years meant recuperation for me'.⁵⁸ Not only *The Gay Science* but all Nietzsche's philosophy represents a convalescence treatise.

A psychologist knows few questions as attractive as that concerning the relation between health and philosophy; and should he himself become ill, he will bring all of his scientific curiosity into the illness.⁵⁹

He made the panegyric of the illness without making a rigorous distinction between the somatic, psychic and spiritual illnesses. In the same paragraph he referred to the intellectual illnesses but also to the eye, nerve, stomach illnesses and also to decadence, a cultural illness. In fact he suffered only from nihilism, together with his entire epoch, to which he consecrated his scientific curiosity. Only from this point of view we can really understand the following excerpt from *Ecce Homo*:

To be able to look out from the optic of sickness towards *healthier* concepts and values, and again the other way around, to look down from the fullness and self-assurance of the *rich* life into the secret work of the instinct of decadence – that was my longest training, my genuine experience, if I became the master of anything, it was this. I have a hand for switching *perspectives*: the first reason why a 'reevaluation of values' is even possible, perhaps for me alone.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibidem, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, 2006. *Ecce Homo* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and other writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 76.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 76.

Having in mind the fact that Nietzsche further described his own experience as a person suffering from nihilism and elaborated less a theory about nihilism, I consider that it is an error to consider him a philosopher of nihilism. Like Cioran later, named the Balcanic Nietzsche, he is only a nihilist, not a theoretician, a *Wissenschaftler*, of this complex phenomenon. But that is in fact his inconsequentiality as a nihilist.

IV. PATIENTS AND PHYSICIANS OF CULTURE

Nietzsche's 'sadism', mentioned by Nordau in *Entartung*, is not a very accurate diagnosis. He lived voluptuously the sufferance resulted from nihilism; in everything else, he was a patient like any other.

All Nietzsche's books, especially those referring to nihilism, are written in a medical language: Socrates was fascinating through the fact that he seemed to be a physician, his reason was just a disease, a religious neurosis; the history of the health of European man and the examples can compose a huge list.

The Genealogy of Morality, *The Anti-Christ*, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, *Ecce homo* and especially the preface of the second edition of *The Gay Science* are sections from a strange 'Convalescence Treatise'.⁶¹ Schopenhauer's morality of compassion was for Nietzsche a symptom of a cultural illness of his time. The philosopher must not 'read' but 'consult', in the same manner as a physician diagnoses and prescribes procedures for recovery. In the value conferred by modern philosophers on compassion, Nietzsche saw

the onset of the final sickness becoming gently, sadly manifest: I understood the morality of compassion, casting around ever wider to catch even philosophers and make them ill, as the most uncanny symptom of our European culture which has itself become uncanny, as its detour to a new Buddhism? to a new Euro-Buddhism? to – *nihilism?* . . .⁶²

When Nietzsche directly referred to nihilism he did not 'write' as a philosopher, but he 'prescribed' procedures as a physician. As we know, the physician makes referrals: to the hospital for illnesses of the body, to the asylum for severe mental illnesses. The philosopher as a physician of

⁶¹ See Ernst Bertram, 1998. *Nietzsche. Încercare de mitologie* (București: Editura Humanitas), p. 123.

⁶² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*, p. 7.

culture does the same thing. To eliminate any confusion, I must specify that in this context I am not speaking only about the illnesses of the soul, which were very clearly explained by Kant in his *Anthropology*. If passion, positive or negative, or emotion surpasses some degree, 'the health of the soul' could be reacquired, for example, through Stoic wisdom. Using Kant's expression we may say that the Stoic philosopher could be a good 'physician of the soul'⁶³. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche was also referring to 'the health of the soul' (*Gesundheit der Seele*), having as starting point Ariston of Chios's idea that 'virtue is the health of the soul'.⁶⁴ Nihilism is not an illness of the soul, but of the spirit, or, when we talk about society, an illness of culture. For those who are ill, Nietzsche 'prescribed' procedures in order to reach 'great health'.⁶⁵ Especially

anyone whose soul thirsts to experience the whole range of previous values and aspirations, to sail around all the coasts of this 'inland sea' (*Mittelmeer*) of ideals, anyone who wants to know from the adventures of his experience how it feels to be the discoverer or conqueror of an ideal, or to be an artist, a saint, a lawmaker, a sage, a pious man, a soothsayer, an old-style divine loner – any such person needs one thing above all – *great health*.⁶⁶

Those sick with nihilism 'introduce the deadliest poison and skepticism into our trust in life, in man, in ourselves'.⁶⁷ What is the physician of culture's prescription for these kinds of patients, through whom nihilism affects the entirety of European culture? Their hospitalization in 'madhouses and hospitals of culture' (*Krankenhäuser und Irrenhäuser der Kultur*).⁶⁸

There is an extensive literature regarding the pathological aspect of nihilism. I will offer some examples to underline my idea. In a conference held on January 7, 1946 in Bremen, right after the Second World War, the German philosopher Ludwig Landgrebe spoke about nihilism as a severe illness of the European spirit.

The illness of which symptoms we must learn to recognize in the present was diagnosed 60 years ago by Friedrich Nietzsche as

⁶³ Immanuel Kant, 2001. *Antropologia din perspectivă pragmatică* (București: Editura Antaios), p. 183.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 116.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 246 (§ 382), *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, § 2.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 246.

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*, p. 89.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 92.

European nihilism. This means that it is not only a German illness. The Occident was and still remains a spiritual unity despite all the differences that appear during the modern period.⁶⁹

It is an illness of European culture but it is also one of the individual person. Nihilism is a major disorder of the axiological conscience, of the way in which we, as human beings, define ourselves referring to values. It is an axiological illness (in the same way as axiological blindness, tyranny of values etc., underlined especially by German authors such as Nicolai Hartmann, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Johannes Hessen) not a psychical one. It is true that this sort of disease can be, at the individual level, accompanied by severe mental diseases: depression, schizophrenia, hysteria etc., but it also can leave unchanged the functions of the human psyche, as Ernst Jünger mentions in his works. A nihilist can be somatically and mentally perfectly healthy. Neurosis, depressions and different kinds of aggression and auto-aggression, which could end with suicide, are not caused by nihilism, even though the literature says the contrary.⁷⁰

All those who categorized nihilism in the area of psychical diseases have met insurmountable paradoxes or used ambiguous expressions, like 'psychical-neurotic nihilism' or 'pathological-destructive nihilism'⁷¹, putting together a psychical and a spiritual illness that do not always occur together.

Including nihilism in the category of axiological illnesses, I hope to offer a way to surpass the dilemmas connected to the interpretation of nihilism as illness. To describe nihilism, to interpret its manifestation, to indicate the ways of surpassing nihilism and to reach 'the great health', all these activities are not for the psychologist or for the psychiatrist, but for the philosopher as physician of culture.

Hermann Rauschning asserts that the first condition to surpass nihilism is the knowledge of its essence. But this is not an easy task. In fact, nihilism 'has no specific form or essence, it could act behind any person or thing. It can be seen only as an effect.'⁷² It is always behind a mask, as Rauschning remarks: it can be destructive behind the mask of a creative

⁶⁹ Ludwig Landsgrebe, 1974. 'Zur Überwindung des europäischen Nihilismus' in Dieter Arendt, *Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte in der wissenschaftlichen Diskussion unseres Jahrhunderts* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), p. 20.

⁷⁰ See Wolfgang Kraus, 1983. *Nihilismus heute oder die Geduld der Weltgeschichte* (Wien & Hamburg: Zsolnay Verlag), p. 139.

⁷¹ Wolfgang Kraus, op. cit., p. 80.

⁷² Hermann Rauschning, 1954. *Masken und Metamorphosen des Nihilismus. Der Nihilismus des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Humboldt-Verlag), p. 7.

force, in the way Nietzsche saw it: 'Change of values - that is a change of creators! Who ever must be a creator always annihilates'.⁷³ Adolf Hitler is a representative example for this 'mask' behind which nihilism appears in history⁷⁴, other types of masks being the artist, the reformer etc.

Nihilism, in Rauschning's view, has some elements which can be found in hysteria; this is why the hysterical responses are mixed up in specialized literature with the nihilist ones.⁷⁵ Like hysteria, nihilism, as a major disease of the human axiological conscience, is more a way of responding. Both in the case of hysterical and nihilist responses the destructive outbreaks are preceded by a sort of apathy. Even though there are many common points, these two types of responses must not be confounded.⁷⁶ It is impossible to establish the type of nihilist⁷⁷; there are different types of hysteria for each type of personality and the same thing is applied to nihilism.

This nihilist's force is the power of the emptiness in a cultural area. As it happens in nature where the vacuum gathers around it great forces, so in the world of spirit, taking the place of values, the emptiness also gathers forces, not necessarily destructive ones, but also creative ones, as has been proved by some artistic avant-gardes.

As any other illness, nihilism can be diagnosed, treated, cured. The philosopher as physician of culture is destined to analyze the health of the spirit, to find the patients and to prescribe them prescriptions. Through one of his characters, created for the novel *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky underlined the role of the philosopher in the therapy of the soul:

I'm convinced there are lots of people in Petersburg who talk to themselves as they walk. This is a town of crazy people. If only we have scientific men, doctors, lawyers and philosophers might make most valuable investigations in Petersburg each in his one line.⁷⁸

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, p. 171.

⁷⁴ Rauschning, *Masken und Metamorphosen*, p. 93.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, pp. 92-3.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, pp. 91-107.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 94.

⁷⁸ Fyodor Dostoevski, 1957. *Criminologia și pedepsirea* (București E.S.P.L.A.), p. 424.

To this sort of ‘queer and sick world... as in a Russian novel’⁷⁹ Nietzsche referred each time he analyzed the nihilism problem.

To make the diagnosis of nihilism means to interpret some symptoms.⁸⁰ Usually nihilism is a diagnosis which does not correspond to the patient’s opinion about himself and against which he virulently protests. Helmut Thielicke spoke about ‘enciphered nihilism’ which is different from ‘assumed nihilism’ when the patient recognizes himself that for him every value has lost its significance, that through value he does not designate anything. Regarding the assumed nihilism, I must underline *the sublime of illness* or ‘the masochist sublime’.⁸¹ Nordau was just partially mistaken when he attributed to Nietzsche a sort of sadism-masochism. The sufferance provoked by nihilism can be the source of great creation or, in philosophy, *the only* way to a work of genius. The voluptuousness of sufferance is in this case easy to understand and Nietzsche explains it in *The Gay Science*:

we philosophers, should we become ill, temporarily surrender with body and soul to the illness – we shut our eyes to ourselves, as it were... permits the question whether it was not illness that inspired the philosopher⁸²

Any physician prescribes a treatment which is meant to slow down the evolution of the disease if this is incurable, or to stop or eliminate the disease. To be capable of prescribing an adequate treatment you must know the nature and the essence of that disease. What is the essence of nihilism? A German author for whom nihilism is a disease phenomenon states that ‘the question about the essence of nihilism is similar to that about a very ill person. In the second case the question is: what is the essence of his disease? We could understand nihilism as a sickness (*Erkrankung*) of human essence’.⁸³ In more precise terminology, we could say that nihilism is a major disease of the human axiological conscience, an

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, p. 603.

⁸⁰ Helmut Thielicke, 1950. *Der Nihilismus. Entstehung, Wesen, Überwindung* (Tübingen: Reichtl Verlag), pp. 40-3.

⁸¹ See Aldo Marroni, 2007. *L'enigma dell'impuro. La sfida dell'estetico nella società, nella sessualità e nell'arte* (Roma: Carocci editore), the chapter *L'enigma del sublime masochistico*, pp. 143-69.

⁸² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 5.

⁸³ Fritz Leist, 1961. *Existenz im Nichts. Versuch einer Analyse des Nihilismus* (München: Manz Verlag), pp. 45-6.

illness of his spirit. The physician of culture does all he can in order that the nihilist patient's illness does not escalate or reach its limits.

The transition phases from one system of values to another are nihilist periods. The fall into oblivion of some values brings a shadow of doubt over all values. Any *Umwertung aller Werte* becomes the hypothesis for *Entwertung aller Werte*, an axiological illness named nihilism. 'It's right that people will say about me that I was a *good* physician – not only for me' wrote Nietzsche to his mother.⁸⁴ Today the philosopher who lives in a world in which *Umwertung aller Werte* is a phenomenon which can be perceived by anyone, has an extraordinary chance: to be a good physician of culture.

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⁸⁴ Cf. Ernst Bertram, op. cit., p. 121.